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Parenting Religiously: Values for Raising Children and Teaching Sex Education

Emily Watkins
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Advisor: Dr. Tom Bremer

In the Bible Belt South, religion is inescapable. Whether or not a person adheres to a specific religion, they are most likely going to face people or policies that are religiously influenced. In our current time and especially our current political climate, it seems that people of different religions are not getting along very well, there are two congregations in Memphis – one Christian and one Muslim – who are paving the way for religious cooperation and unity. Heartsong United Methodist Church and the Memphis Islamic Center (MIC) both share a road and area of land in Cordova, Tennessee. Heartsong has been in their location for about 19 years, while MIC has only been there for about 9 years. These two congregations have set aside their differences, doctrinal or otherwise, to form a bond and a relationship that is unique to Heartsong and MIC. Their love for the others' congregation and their work together even sparked a video produced by Starbucks in their "Upstanders" series, chronicling the relationship and work the two groups have done together.¹ Although Heartsong and MIC have come together, the fact cannot be ignored that the two have different theological beliefs. In one congregation, the important day is Sunday; in the other, the important day is Friday. In one congregation, Jesus is the central figure; in the other, Muhammad. While other differences can be listed, there are also many similarities. Both congregations believe in the oneness of God. Both congregations observe certain holidays and religious laws. Furthermore, there is one thing that both congregations can say they have a lot of: parents.

¹ Starbucks, "Upstanders-The Mosque Across the Street," YouTube, September 07, 2016, accessed June 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t33Hy4XSymg>.

Around the world, regardless of location, religious creed, skin color, or any other differences, parents struggle to raise their children to be responsible and prepared adults themselves. All parents want is for their children to succeed in life. However, parenting practices will differ based on a variety of important factors, one of which is religion. While the overall goal of parents is for their children to be happy, healthy, and successful, parents also want to pass down whatever religious beliefs they have to their children. Religion is a binding component, bringing together people of like faith and practices. Religion informs many decisions parents have to make, one of which is teaching their children sex education. A touchy subject for some and not a big deal to others, sex education, at least in the South, is heavily influenced by religious belief. All of the major world religions—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism—have ideas, opinions, and prohibitions about sex.² These opinions come into play when parents are deciding how to talk to—or not talk to—their children about sex. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influences of religion on parenting, and more specifically, how religious belief influences how parents teach their children sex education.³

² Amy Adamczyk and Brittany E. Hayes, "Religion and Sexual Behaviors: Understanding the Influence of Islamic Culture and Religious Affiliation for Explaining Sex Outside of Marriage," *American Sociological Review* 77, no. 5 (2012): 723-46.

³ Because of the many similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity, and the unique relationships that Heartsong and MIC have in Memphis, data will be collected from these congregations. It must be noted that although MIC and Heartsong are both Islamic and Christian congregations, respectively, the findings from each group cannot be generalized to each religion and its followers as a whole. All names used are pseudonyms except for those of the religious leaders. Furthermore, I cannot go further without thanking the wonderful people I've met through this research experience. From two hour talks at Jason's Deli to three and a half hour long interviews, dinner conversations, and laughing at Jimmy Fallon videos, I have been welcomed into people's hearts, homes, dinner tables, and lives. For that, I am truly blessed, and it is these encounters that have made this experience so wonderful.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are a few limitations to my research. First, the purpose of this project was to research something about Memphis, so I looked at two very specific congregations in the city. Because of this, my research cannot be generalized. Among

Inferred from its name, the Bible Belt, this region of the southern United States is predominantly Christian. In fact, Memphis is almost at the very center of the Bible Belt, an area that some people call the “Buckle.” According to the Pew Research Center, the religious make-up of adults in Tennessee is 81% Christian, 3% non-Christian, and 14% unaffiliated. With only 3% of people making up non-Christian faiths, Tennessee’s Muslim population is only 1% of the total population.⁴ However, in a very small corner of Cordova, Tennessee, Muslims and Christians come together to form an interfaith community that is truly unique to Memphis. Through my interviews with parents from Heartsong United Methodist and the Memphis Islamic Center, as well as a few community and religious leaders, I was able to talk to religious individuals about how their faith has influenced them as parents. An important part of raising children to become adults is teaching them about a natural part of life—sex—and with the strong religious stereotypes associated with talking and teaching about sex education, I felt this would be a timely and important avenue of study. Therefore, I was also able to begin to understand how religious belief influences how parents are teaching their children sex education, what they are teaching their children, and why it is or is not being taught. Through these conversations, I found that religion provides a basis for the values that parents want to instill in their children. In terms

Christians and Muslims, and even among different congregations of the same denomination (e.g. the United Methodist Church), there is going to be a wide variety of belief and practices. My findings and the conversations I had can only be generalized to the people I talked to. This brings me to the second limitation, which is the number of interviews. While each interview was very detailed and provided a significant amount of information, I was only able to get a handful of interviews from each congregation. Although I hypothesize that many of the answers in other interviews would have been similar, fewer interviews means a lack of variability to my data. It is also important to note that all of the Muslim families I interviewed were Pakistani. Therefore, any discussion of culture needs to be thought of as more Pakistani rather than Islamic and is not necessarily generalizable to other Muslim-majority countries.

⁴ "Religious Landscape Study: Adults in Tennessee." Religion and Public Life. Accessed July 1, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/tennessee/>.

of sex education, religion dictates the underlying principles present in those lessons and conversations, but it does not dictate the process by which it is taught.

Just as Heartsong and MIC are bringing together these two different religious organizations in such a unique way, at the same time that they celebrate their differences, such was the goal of this paper. Looking at the role that Islam and Christianity play in parenting, and the influence of this on sex education, provides a way to compare and contrast practices of the people in the two congregations. Out of all of the congregations of Christians and Muslims in Memphis, I chose these two because I find them to be a rare and refreshing example of religious reconciliation and cooperation. Furthermore, as fairly progressive congregations extremely faithful to their own religious teachings and scriptures, I felt that parents would have a unique point of view on the role of religion in parenting and teaching sex education. While the stereotypical religious person is thought to tout strict ideals of abstinence and purity, especially in a region like the South, I thought that parents in these congregations might have less strict, more modern views on parenting and sex education compared to their counterparts. Before asking them about that, though, I wanted to know what they personally thought makes their respective congregations so wonderful.

Memphis Islamic Center

As previously noted, both MIC and Heartsong are unique congregations in their own respects, but they are also unique to the people who attend these communities. In my interviews, one of the questions I asked each interviewee was why they thought their respective congregation was special and what they thought was the best thing about it.

The Memphis Islamic Center is a very special place to all of the people who attend it, and it even became a special place to me. I greatly enjoyed my time at the mosque during Ramadan

and was welcomed by its members. People would go out of their way to make sure I had a chair to sit in during prayer, even if the room was already completely full. Sheikh Yasir Qadhi is both the Resident Scholar and MIC and a Rhodes Professor. Within Islam, there are not ordained clergy like a church might have, so each mosque sets up their leadership in the way they desire. As Resident Scholar, Sheikh Qadhi gives lectures and sermons at the mosque, and sometimes leads prayer, to provide people at the mosque with different educational opportunities and experiences. Having heard Sheikh Yasir Qadhi speak about MIC before, I was excited to spend some time there and see why it is so special to so many. In my interview with Sheikh Qadhi, I asked him what makes it unique. He said, "I just like to say that we are... amongst the most diverse and amongst the most forward-thinking mosques in the area... even as we are rooted in the tradition." In most mosques, there is a wall dividing the men and women, who are separated during prayer, and it is really only a place of prayer. Women and men are divided during prayer for two main reasons: prayers, especially the Friday prayers in the mosque, are an obligation for men while they are not for the women, and prayer involves kneeling and prostration, so it is deemed somewhat inappropriate to have women bending over in prayer in front of men.⁵ Rather than separating the men and women by a wall or other more obtrusive partition, MIC simply uses a small rope. While for the most part Islamic tradition requires this separation of gender, it is a discussion that is being had in the Islamic community, and MIC's use of the rope is a more modern touch. When prayer is not happening in the main room, people pull out ping pong tables and play in the same room in which they pray, or they watch the latest cricket match. That does not happen in other mosques, according to Sheikh Qadhi. He said, "The men and women are all

⁵ Michel Martin, Asra Nomani, and Asha Abdi, "Muslim Women Debate Gender Segregation In Mosques." Faith Matters, March 12, 2010, accessed July 7, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124623737>.

intermixing... kind of naturally, organically. Other mosques... you're not gonna find this.... In terms of sermons... we are very English-oriented.... We try our best to... be a part of civic awareness. We do things maybe in interfaith that other mosques don't do.... I think it's just a cultural and second-generation type of difference.”

Two of the families I interviewed, the Hammouds and the Khans, also discussed why they thought MIC is special. Dr. Mariam Hammoud mentioned how MIC is more of a community center. Yes, they use it to pray, but they also have many other events there, too. Dr. Hammoud said of MIC, “It’s more like a community center.... [it has] all the aspects of life covered so that people like to bring their children there so that they will be more in touch with the religion and their social life together.” The Khans spoke about how Sheikh Qadhi was MIC’s most important asset and how they feel “lucky that he is among us.” Dr. Ali Khan also likened MIC to how mosques used to be. Rather than being just a place to pray, he said that the “mosque was the seat of government. It was your parliament. It was the welfare center. It was where the community came together.... That was the place where foreign delegations came in the life of the Prophet.... War councils, peace treaties—everything was done inside the mosque. And MIC has in some ways tried to bring that back.” He even spoke about how MIC was very similar to churches, which he really admires, because they are not just a place of worship, but also a place that brings the community together for all sorts of events. “That concept, from Islamic standpoint, is a true Islamic concept of community, of binding together through your place of worship.”⁶ MIC is ultimately a place of both prayer and community, which they hope to expand in the new center they are building.

⁶ Drs. Salma and Aki Khan, Personal Interview, June 21, 2017.

Heartsong Church

Heartsong is also a place that many people find very special because of their welcoming attitude. Pastor Steve Stone founded the church about 20 years ago and led the church in their relationship with MIC. Pastor Stone has now retired, but his successor has been at the church for eight years and plans to continue their relationship with MIC as they have done in the past. In an interview with Pastor Stone, I asked him what he thinks makes Heartsong Church so special or different from other churches around. He said that he and about 34 other people formed Heartsong 19 years ago “for people who didn’t like church, who didn’t want to go to church.... We tried to style the church in such a way that it was culturally relevant, and people would be culturally comfortable coming in.” Pastor Stone noted that although parts of the church services are very modern and different, such as the fact that they sing songs people hear on the radio, like Jimmy Buffett’s ‘Margaritaville,’ where they extract the gospel messages from the songs, when it comes to the actual speaking and sermons, it’s “all Jesus all the time.” He remarked that what makes Heartsong different from other churches is that “we try real hard to help people who didn’t think they were God’s people understand that they were God’s people.” All of these intentional choices have resulted in a church that has been thriving for the past 19 years. Although there was a bit of opposition when Heartsong welcomed the Memphis Islamic Center across the street and formed the close relationship they have today, out of the 800 or so members of Heartsong, only about 20 people left the church. While Pastor Stone tried to work with them, he said that “if they really believed what they believed, they weren’t Heartsong anyway.”

Seven Smith, a member of Heartsong and a single mother, has been through almost the full spectrum of Christian churches since she found Christ in high school, which she described as the “most incredible, out of body experience.” Landing at Heartsong a few years ago was a

blessing to her and her son. Heartsong, as a church, has everything she ever wanted—people greeting you, an amazing band, opportunities to volunteer and serve, small groups, and even the opportunity to start your own volunteer activity. When I attended the church myself, I was greeted at the door, given hugs from people in the service, and left with a Heartsong mug and pen that I was handed on my way out. According to Smith, the church was “full of love” and told people to “come as you are.” She said that Heartsong was “life-changing for me and my son.” After joining Heartsong, Smith attended the lecture of a preacher who she said identified as gay. Little did she know, through her initial unwillingness to go to the lecture and subsequent attendance, God was “softening” her heart for something she never expected—a couple years later, her son came out to her as gay. As he struggled with his sexuality, Smith told her son that nothing could make Jesus not love him. She said, “He made you; how could he not love you?” What she wanted her son to know was that there was nothing he could do that would make Jesus love him less. Smith noted that had she and her son not been at Heartsong when he came out, they would not have gotten through the last few years like they did. Heartsong encourages children and adults alike to be whoever it is that God intended them to be. As Pastor Stone said, the people of Heartsong best like to be described as “a grateful recovering Jesus-following tribe of knoheads, hotheads, potheads, sots, and assorted nuts.” According to him, if you claim you do not fit into one of these categories, then “you’re in denial,” he joked; however, Heartsong will take you in anyways.

Memphis Friendship Foundation

One amazing outcome of the friendship between Heartsong United Methodist Church and the Memphis Islamic Center is the Memphis Friendship Foundation (MFF). MFF is a Memphis-based non-profit that exists “to create opportunities for building friendships based on mutual

understanding and respect between people of all races, cultures and faiths.”⁷ It has plans to create a Friendship Park on eight acres of land between Heartsong and MIC; a bridge will connect the two parts of the park, divided by a street. It is an 11 million dollar project, and Pastor Stone described it as being “something like Mini-Epcot Memphis.” They are even working with the ambassador from the United Arab Emirates to the United States. There will be translation technology in the park so that everyone can communicate with each other. MFF is even hoping that sister parks will be built around the world, including one in Abu Dhabi. Pastor Stone said, “We are trying to get so much momentum going that by the time we go to the county planning office, they gotta say okay.” News sites around the world have picked up on the relationship between Heartsong, MIC, and MFF. Because of the amazing support they’ve received, Pastor Stone said that they believe “that building friendship makes the world a safer and more joyful place. That’s our tagline, but we actually think it happens.” Interestingly enough, Pastor Stone never imagined himself working in any capacity similar to this or being a key leader in an interfaith movement. He said that was never really in his realm of interest; he was not against it, he said, but he was more of an “all Jesus all the time” type of guy. Pastor Stone then laughed and said, “So that’s where I was putting all my energies, and then the Lord plopped a big group of Muslims right next to us.... It’s been amazing fun.”

Heartsong and Memphis Islamic Center are a wonderful example for what can happen when two groups of different religions put aside their differences and work together. Once they get to know each other, they can become more cognizant of their similarities rather than their differences. With publicity like the video Starbucks made and the work of the Memphis

⁷ "The Project Background," Memphis Friendship Foundation, May 01, 2017, accessed July 8, 2017, <http://www.memphisfriendshipfoundation.org/friendship-park/>.

Friendship Foundation, hopefully this type of positive relationship can become more of a norm all around the world.

While both of these congregations as institutions are very modern and fairly progressive, they also stick closely to what their religious scriptures say. They are anchored in their holy texts. For Christians, that is the Bible; for Muslims, that is the Qur'an and the Hadith. Pastor Stone said, "I think there's only one way to get to know Jesus personally, and that's to read the gospels yourself and stay in the gospels." Sheikh Qadhi also spoke about being "rooted in the tradition." To these congregations, modernization and progressiveness is important, but so is closely sticking to the tenets of the faith and what is found in the religious texts.

Religious Texts and Parenting

For Muslims, the Qur'an is the holy book and is the literal word of God revealed to Muhammad in Arabic. The Qur'an is supplemented by the Hadith and the Sunnah, which are the sayings and the practices of the Prophet Muhammad, respectively. When speaking with Sheikh Qadhi one night after the nighttime Ramadan prayer, *tarawih*, he spoke about what he thinks is one of the greatest strengths of the Qur'an: it is not always specific and does not give an answer to all of life's questions. Sheikh Qadhi said, "I would say this is of the strengths of the Qur'an, that [it] doesn't give you a detailed manual because cultures vary.... It doesn't give you a detailed to-do list." When asked what Islam or the Qur'an had to say about parenting and sex education, he replied that of course, the Qur'an does not have a "Parenting Guide." The way that people learn from religious texts is to take the morals of stories that are present and what God says of them, which can then be applied to other life experiences. Sheikh Qadhi said that there are a number of stories in the Qur'an about parenting where the parenting literature comes from.

All of my searches for parenting lessons from the Qur'an pointed to the Surah, or chapter, of Luqman.⁸ From this Surah, we can extrapolate a few lessons, which are mostly geared towards children and how parents should raise them. Verse 17 says, "O my son! Establish prayer, enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, and be patient over what befalls you. Indeed, that is of the matters (requiring) determination." From this, we can learn that parents should teach children good values and to offer prayers.⁹ Furthermore, Verse 16 says, "O my son! If it be (anything) equal to the weight of grain of mustard seed, and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, Allah will bring forth. Verily, Allah is Subtle Well-Aware." Parents should teach their children to trust Allah and work hard.¹⁰ Parents can even learn that they should teach their children patience, through this verse, which says, "Rather, your souls have enticed you to something, so patience is most fitting."¹¹

Just as parenting stories and advice can be extrapolated from stories in the Qur'an, so can they be found in the Bible. A quick Google search for Bible verses about parenting revealed many results. One website, entitled "What Christians Want to Know,"¹² listed a few verses and parenting advice that can be extracted from them. For example, 1 Corinthians 11: 1 says, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." From this, parents should know that

⁸ "Parenting Tips from Surah Luqman," Quran Reading, December 5, 2014, accessed July 18, 2017, <http://www.quranreading.com/blog/parenting-tips-from-surah-luqman/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Qur'an 12:18. Rabiya Fahma Dawood, "Eight Parenting Lessons from Surah Yoosuf," IIPH Blog, October 10, 2016, accessed July 18, 2017, <http://blog.iiph.com/eight-parenting-lessons-from-surah-yoosuf/>.

¹² David Peach, "4 Important Parenting Lessons Straight From The Bible," What Christians Want To Know RSS, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/4-important-parenting-lessons-straight-from-the-bible/>.

they need to set a good example and be a good role model for their children. Furthermore, Colossians 3: 21 says, “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.”¹³ In my interview with Minister Essence Jackson, we spoke about this. She is the Interim Interfaith and Outreach Coordinator for SisterReach, a Memphis-based reproductive justice organization. Jackson spoke about two specific Bible verses that come to mind: Proverbs 22: 6 and 2 Timothy 2: 15. Proverbs 22: 6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Jackson said that “If I give my child... the information they need... they may stray but they won’t... go far from that.” She also quoted 2 Timothy 2:15, which says, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Jackson says she takes this verse to mean that whatever work we are doing or subjects we are studying—including sex education—we should make sure we know well. She uses these two verses especially to talk about the importance of comprehensive sex education. While some verses are more general and others specifically address parents, parenting lessons can be learned and inferred from stories in the Bible. Jackson said, “I think when we start to begin to look at the Bible as a text that’s liberating, that seeks to keep us empowered, that seeks to keep us free, I think it’ll change the narrative of how we interpret certain texts.” Religious texts seem to provide a value system that people of that faith, and especially parents, can live by and teach their children.

Religion as a value system

One of the most common things that came up in all of the interviews I did, with both Muslims and Christians, was the importance of values and morals for living a good and faithful life. For most Muslim parents, Islam was literally a system of values by which a person should

¹³ Ibid.

live. Islam teaches its followers the values of the religion, which are values for being a good and productive member of society. Dr. Ali Khan said, “Islam is a source... of values for us.... That’s what we try to impart to [our son], and that’s how we think of things.” He also said, “I think Islam... is... sort of integral to who we are. That is sort of the source of our value system. You know, what is right, what is wrong... of course you know we have the sense of civic laws and normal and things like that, but also the primary set of core values for us, that comes from Islam.” Dr. Mariam Hammoud specified what a lot of these values were. She said, “Don’t lie, be honest, don’t cheat, no stealing, and these kind of common values that you... have in Christianity too.” Noor Hassan, a mother of three boys, heavily emphasized honesty with her children; she encourages them to always be honest, even when they have done something wrong. She also spoke about how the current climate makes kindness and honesty even more important.

Dr. Hammoud, as she mentioned above, said that Islam and Christianity teach many of the same values also said, “What Christianity teaches, if you follow that, you will actually be following the same rules that Islam teaches.” This reference to Christianity was very interesting because the other Muslim parents also mentioned it, too. The Khan’s son attended Presbyterian Day School (PDS) as a child, which is a Christian private school. They were happy to have their son in a private Christian school, as compared to a public school, because “at least the church, like Christians, they have their values also. They are teaching, which will be maybe different a little bit than Islam, but still the values, they teach the same thing.” Ali also laughed at the fact that his son “had really good grades in Bible class.” He noted that a lot of the concepts and values that they talk about in Islam were imparted to his son when he was at PDS. Mrs. G also made the same comparison between Islamic and Christian values. She said, “I want [my children] to be Muslim because I love being Muslim and... carry those values... and that means

being good human being. If you are good Christian, good Muslim, you [are] automatically good human being... if you're really good and true to that." Dr. Sal said the same thing about Christianity. He said, "I think the teachings are pretty much not different in different religions. If you look at the essence of all religions... all of the religions have the similar laws and similar types of values. Basically, it's just a little different in there." He even went so far as to say that religion was sent so that civilizations could "grow with the laws and norms," and without them, we would "not see the growth that we've seen in civilization, human evolution." These values, with their basis in religion, are what Muslim parents wanted to impart to their children.

Similar ideas and values were expressed by the Christian parents I interviewed. Seven Smith just wanted her son to be the best human he could be, which by its nature, means having and practicing the same values that many of the Muslim parents talked about, such as being honest, not stealing, and doing the right thing. For Pastor Stone, teaching your child to know Jesus will then result in a person's living by Jesus' greatest commandment: loving God and loving your neighbor. He said, "For us, the standard was always love." Another Christian parent, Amanda Williams, echoed the same sentiments about the importance of values. When speaking of her own parents, Williams spoke of how her mother "always imparted values, like values of working hard, values of being kind to other people, respecting authority, those kind of values. And I think those are also Christian values...." Both Christians and Muslims find guiding life values, which they want to impart to their children, in their respective religious traditions.

Faith and Parenting

When I interviewed parents, I asked them all what they most wanted to teach their children in life, specifically in regards to religion. Each set of parents wanted to overall teach their children to be good people. Religion was also at the focus of this. Seven Smith said that she

simply wanted her son to be healthy and happy. She also wanted him to be a light, to serve God, to keep Christ first, and to be the best human he can be. Smith never wanted him to forget that he is, and will always be, a “child of God.”

For Pastor Stone, “the most important thing a parent can do is introduce their children to Jesus.” He qualified this by saying he did not mean it in a “super religious way,” but rather he means that it is what keeps him going in the right direction with his life. He says that “Jesus taught to love the Lord your God” and to “love your neighbor as you love yourself... and Jesus said, everything fits under that.” For Pastor Stone, if a person follows those rules, and this is what parents are teaching their kids, then they will be living as they should. He taught his children that “the standard was always love,” and his children, in whatever situation they find themselves in, should ask “is this loving?” While he notes that knowing whether something is loving or not can sometimes be hard to figure out, that is the standard by which they should be living their lives.

Amanda Williams wanted to impart in her kids the importance of following Jesus, echoing Pastor Stone, and following what He teaches—the values mentioned about such as kindness, gentleness, and loving your neighbor. When asked about what she wanted to teach her children most about her religion, she made a very interesting point. Williams spoke about how Heartsong differentiates between “religion and following Jesus.” Williams said, “Religion is, as Steve [Stone] says,... is a set of man-made rules that make you behave a certain way in church, and following Jesus is just following his teachings.” To her, religion is “not a bunch of rules. It’s about let’s read the Bible, let’s see what Jesus says, and let’s follow that rule. And... I can see in my son... that he’s learned kindness—especially kindness—and gentleness and love toward people.” While a discussion about the difference between religion as a set of man-made rules and

religion as following the teachings and values of it's God is out of the scope of this paper, it is an interesting topic to think about and one I think warrants further study.

It was much the same for Muslim parents; religion was central to their lives and what they wanted to teach their children. The Hammoud parents spoke about how they “had religion as the main focus while raising the children.” They made sure their children learned from the Qur'an and learned how to pray; their kids also went to Islamic school at Pleasant View, where they learned the basic values and tenets of the religion, as well as religious history. Mariam said that one of the hardest things, when trying to teach your children about their religion and values and rules, is that not all Muslims are the same or have exactly the same practices. Of course, there are the Five Pillars¹⁴ and the other more universal beliefs and practices, but there is also variety, just as there are in other religions as well. It's hard because “you can't even tell them that Muslims don't do that because your Muslim friend or their kids will be doing the same thing that you are telling them don't do that.”¹⁵ They stressed the importance of following the rules that they kept in their own house. Mariam said that you “cannot generalize it because everybody nowadays... has a different scope of practice.” To the Hammoud parents, it was important that they taught their children the compulsory things like praying, giving charity, and going on a pilgrimage; however, the most important is that “Islam teaches to be good with your family, with your friends, [and] with your neighbors.” The Khan parents also note that in Islam, “Everybody

¹⁴ The Five Pillars of Islam summarize the five main things that Muslims believe: Belief (in the Oneness of God, and that Muhammad is his messenger), Worship (five prayers per day—dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset, and nighttime), Fasting (if able, during the month of Ramadan), Almsgiving (donating a specific amount of property yearly to charity), and Pilgrimage (pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during lifetime, if able). See "Five Pillars," Islam Empire of Faith, accessed July 7, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/faithpillars.html>.

¹⁵ Drs. Mariam and Asad Hammoud, Personal Interview, June 19, 2017.

is responsible for only themselves.” There are no excuses for not doing things that you are supposed to. Dr. Ali Khan said, “If I knew the truth, I have to do it on my own.”

For Mrs. G, also a Muslim parent, her own upbringing heavily influenced how she has raised her children. Growing up in Lahore, Pakistan, Mrs. G’s mother was very religious, while her father was not very religious. Her mom was the one who taught her to follow her religion; her father, on the other hand, taught her how to question and think critically about things. She said, “It was a good combination in a way.” When her eldest daughter started asking questions in middle school, she decided to be much more open with her daughter than her own mom had been with her. She said, “That’s when the questions started and that’s why I changed myself because I wanted her to be open to me about anything.” While Mrs. G became more religious a bit later in life, she has always encouraged her kids to ask questions, just like her father had. “I never stopped them from questioning,” she said, although she admitted, laughing, that might make things a little easier for her, because kids do ask a lot of questions. However, especially when it came to religion and the rules that come along with that, she wanted her children to be following the religion because they wanted to, not because she told them to. When speaking about her eldest daughter, she said, “If she wants to cover up, then she should do it fully with her heart, not just because I told her so.” Most of the parents echoed these sentiments—they did not want to force religion or their own practices on their children, but rather, they wanted their children to make those decisions on their own, with the hopes that their parenting practices would lead to them making the right decisions.

A common theme that emerged among parents speaking about teaching their children was teaching by example. The Hammouds said, “We practiced, and they followed.” The Khan parents talked a lot about this as well. When speaking about how they prepared their son for the

temptations he would most likely face when he was older, Dr. Ali Khan said, “I think part of that is how you also set examples.... We don’t drink, we don’t smoke, we don’t do drugs. I think it’s a little difficult to talk to kids about not drinking if in every dinner at home you are serving wine and alcohol.” The Hammouds said that they never had to force their kids to observe aspects of the religion; they did it by themselves. Apparently the Hammouds set such a good religious foundation for their kids that they said their children sometimes “observe better than us.” They will sometimes even correct their parents and have more knowledge. This was a fact that the Hammoud parents laughed about but also of which they seemed proud.

Parents, Religion, and Sex Education

Having “The Talk” with your children is a parenting rite of passage. Whether or not these discussions are intentional, it is likely that questions are going to be raised. Many Christians and Muslims say that their religions or their religious texts consider premarital sex a sin. However, one of the fascinating things about religion is that there is such a variety of belief among followers about so many different topics, sex being one of them. This results in a variety of types of teachings about sex education. Some parents do not talk about sex, others give the abstinence-only talk, and others give their children comprehensive sex education, including information on birth control, safe-sex, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections and diseases (STIs and STDs, respectively). While religion does predict the values that underlie the teachings of sex education, it does not seem to predict exactly how or what parents will teach their children.

Islamic belief prohibits sex before marriage, but it also celebrates sex as a normal and wonderful part of *married* life. The Qur’an, in the Surah of the Night Journey, Verse 32, says, “And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way.” Sheikh Qadhi, in one of his online lectures on sexuality and intimacy, says, “Islam views

the human sexual experience as being one of the greatest gifts that God has given to mankind.... However, he has told us that the only way to truly find fulfillment in this act that is beneficial to the person and to the family and to society as a whole is to confine sexuality... and intimacy within the bounds of marriage.”¹⁶ Because the Qur’an does not have an explicit manual for parenting, and the idea of a formal sex education is a relatively new concept, the Qur’an does not specifically say anything about how parents should teach their children sex education, what should be taught, or when it should be taught. Sheikh Qadhi said about this:

When it comes to sex ed... there’s nothing explicit in the Qur’an, but there is a verse that talks about teaching children modesty, and one of the things that Qur’an explicitly says is tell your children to get permission before they enter your bedrooms during the three times when you take a nap or go to sleep.... Then, when the children come of age, teach them to seek permission no matter what time it is.¹⁷

He notes that this is a verse about teaching “sexual modesty” and “propriety,” and from this verse, we can know that “the Qur’an does want parents to take a hands-on approach about teaching sex ed.” However, there is more to teaching sex education than just talking about modesty and propriety, but the Qur’an does not speak about this. To this, Sheikh Qadhi says, “The details, I would say as a theologian, are left for the time and place and culture.” He says that the only guidelines are to be sensible and to teach age-appropriate information to our children. Although he did not specifically mention what he meant by “age-appropriate information,” this is something that is most likely left up to the discretion of the time, place, and culture.

¹⁶ Yasir Qadh,. "Does Islam suppress sexuality & intimacy? - Yasir Qadhi | 26th May 2012." Yasir Qadhi Understanding Islam, September 21, 2014, accessed June 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rsz7xKXKpDc>.

¹⁷ Sheikh Yasir Qadhi. Personal Interview. June 21, 2017.

When asking parents about how they went about teaching their children sex education, they almost all approached it from a religious standpoint. Dr. Mariam Hammoud said, when asked if they had talked to their kids about sex education, “You are supposed to of course talk to your children. Islamically, we do because you want them to know what is right and what is wrong. So that means... in Islam, premarital sex or having girlfriend or boyfriend is not allowed.... We did tell them in the very beginning that that’s... what is allowed in Islam and what is not.... Growing up... you will talk to them about puberty and how to handle all those things and how to interact with other children.” However, there seemed to be a lack of education about safe-sex practices. This being said, since premarital sex is a considered a sin in Islam, perhaps this is because it is assumed that religious individuals will not sin. Another Muslim mother, Dr. Salma Khan, restated that dating and sex were “completely forbidden. You can like somebody, you can propose, but you cannot go out and [have] premarital sex or anything... even before marriage or after [outside of] marriage.” When asked if they had talked to their son about puberty, Ali Khan said, “I don’t think we did, no.... I think this is where the point about culture comes in.... Discussion about sex is almost a taboo in our culture. That’s not something you talk about – considered not a decent thing, not a conversation you want to have.” This discussion about culture will be examined further in a later section.

For Mrs. G and Dr. Sal’s children, Mrs. G took an ask-and-answer type of approach. If her daughters or sons have questions, she answers them to the best of her ability. Mrs. G’s mother never talked to her about sex, and she did not feel like she could ask questions. Mrs. G said that her mother “didn’t tell me anything about sex at all—zero. Even when I got married I had zero idea what’s gonna happen, what’s not.... When I got my periods, I thought I had a cancer,” which she laughs about now. Her mom did send a friend to talk to her before she got

married, where she was told “very vague stuff that actually made me afraid of... getting married.” Mrs. G decided that she did not want to do that to her own children, so she went to go talk to her daughter about getting her period and related information, after her daughter’s school, Hutchison, did a program on periods. When she went to talk to her daughter, her daughter told her that her grandmother, Mrs. G’s mom, had already told her all about it. Mrs. G was very angry with her mother because she felt like that was her job to talk to her daughter about that, as well as the fact that her own mother had never talked to her about it either. She said, “My mom told her everything.... I just thought that was my thing to do.” When she approached her mother about this, her mom said, “You were in Pakistan, she is [in the] U.S.; she needs to know everything.” This, again, brings up the idea of cultural differences, which will be discussed more in a following section.

For the Christian parents I interviewed, sex outside of marriage was also highly discouraged but not quite to the extent that the Muslim parents noted. While Muslim parents said it was a sin, only one Christian parent noted that it was a sin, and even then, she knew that her child would most likely not wait until marriage in the kind of society we lived in today. I also asked Pastor Stone, more as a parent himself than a pastor, his views on sex education and how he and his wife talked to their four children about it. When talking about parenting in general, Pastor Stone said, “Whether or not you’re a Jesus follower has something to do with what you believe, [but] it has way more to do with how you live.” He said that for him and his wife, the same thing applied to sex education. When they were younger, he would tell his kids, “For us to just let you do anything you want to do sexually would not be loving you because you don’t know what you’re doing.” He jokingly added that the brain is not even fully formed until around the age of 30. They wanted to teach their kids “boundaries and respect.” Pastor Stone said he and

his wife definitely took an abstinence only approach with their children but knew “that they probably were not going to live up to that standard,” he said, laughing. Although they taught their kids that waiting until marriage was the standard “spiritually, scientifically, emotionally, [and] psychologically that we feel like would be best for you,” they also gave their children comprehensive sex education information on topics like STIs and STDs, protection, and birth control. Pastor Stone also made it clear that there was no shaming involved in teaching their kids about sex and how they should wait for marriage. This was an idea that Noor Hassan echoed as well. Pastor Stone said, “You know, I may try to shame them into not doing something,” but he would never shame them if they had already done it.

Seven Smith actually had to have the sex talk with her son in the 4th grade after he came home and said a boy in his class was talking about oral sex. While she was not originally prepared to have that conversation quite that young, Smith felt that she had an obligation to be truthful with her son, even if he did not fully understand everything she was telling him. She took a very biblical, but also very realistic, approach to teaching her son about sex. Smith told her son that the Bible says that people should wait for marriage to have sex, and premarital sex is sinful; however, she told him that a lot of people do not wait, but it would be best if he could. Then, when he was 13 years old, she bought him a book and talked with him again. In an ideal world, she said, everybody would wait, but she also wanted him to have all the correct information and was “very real with him” because the idea of waiting until marriage is getting more and more rare in the kind of world we live in. Smith told her son that it would be great if he could wait like Jesus said to, but she would “rather [him] be safe than sorry” and gave him information about using protection should he decide to be sexually active before marriage. Smith

also encouraged her son to always talk to her and ask her questions. She did not have that kind of relationship with her own mother and made a conscious decision to raise her son very differently.

Amanda Williams had similar viewpoints on sex education as did Seven Smith, but Williams noted that she didn't really take a biblical approach at all. With her two oldest children, Williams remarked that she was a very young parent, and her way of parenting changed slightly with her youngest son. Williams told her children, "Think about yourself and what you want out of life and what you need, and you know, don't have sex with a lot of different partners. And I realize you may, but I'd really rather you didn't." Williams made sure that her kids knew they could come talk to her if they did become sexually active so that she could help them get birth control or talk about things like that. However, she noted that "it was like a double-edged sword because it was like, I'm telling you this, but I don't condone it, but I'm trying to recognize the reality of life in... what kids face.... There's so much pressure." Although she did not tell her kids what the Bible does or does not specifically say about sex—she mentioned a couple times that she did not know if the Bible actually says that premarital sex is not allowed—Williams did pick up "principles from the Bible" like "treat your body like a temple—pure—you know, and try and be pure in mind, and pure in spirit, and pure in body." With her younger son, Williams started talking with him about sex earlier than she did with her older children because she recognized that she waited too long with them.

One interesting, and very important thing, Pastor Stone said is that he believes parents are responsible for educating their kids about sex. But he also said, "I think it needs to be reinforced at the church and the school." Williams echoed these opinions. She said, "I think it's kind of a three-pronged approach.... It's ultimately the parents' responsibility; they're your child. But I think at church you can work on the message of value.... I think at school, it's up to them...in

biology to explain the physical aspect. But the parent can talk about the emotional aspect....” For the most part, this seemed to be what parents were following. Each set of parents had some sort of discussion about sex with their children, or at least their expectations for their kids (e.g. not having sex until marriage). Religion informed the presence of abstinence-only values in the discussions, but it did not dictate the rest of the information given. For the Hammouds and Khans, it seemed like most of whatever sex education the children had came from school. The parents made clear that the Islamic standard was that premarital sex was a sin. Mrs. G and Dr. Sal seemed to combine all of these approaches, with maybe slightly more emphasis on comprehensive information. In my interviews with Pastor Stone, Seven Smith, and Amanda Williams revealed similar themes, except that no sex before marriage was set as the standard to try to live up to, but there was also understanding that their kids might not live up to that standard. Because of that, Pastor Stone, Smith, and Williams wanted their children to have the necessary knowledge to practice safe sex. Religion most certainly influenced how parents taught their children sex education, but it did not dictate exactly how they did it.

Sex Education in Memphis Schools

While most people may think that parents should be the primary educators for their children’s sex education, as Pastor Stone said, it should be supplemented by the church and schools. With Memphis being in the Buckle of the Bible Belt, it is no shock to learn that Shelby County Schools have a very strict abstinence-only philosophy about sex education. However, with rates of gonorrhea and chlamydia that are the highest in the nation—over double the national average— and teen pregnancy rates way above the average, it is clear that these

teachings are not being followed.¹⁸ In 2012, SB3310 was passed, which is also known as the “Gateway Sexual Activity” or “No Hand Holding” law. According to this bill, sex education curriculum in Shelby County Schools should cover unhealthy and healthy relationships and should be medically accurate. However, there are a lot of things that cannot be covered or condoned. SB3301 says that curriculum may not “promote, implicitly or explicitly, any gateway sexual activity or health message that encourages students to experiment with non-coital sexual activity.”¹⁹ Furthermore, it may not “provide or distribute materials on school grounds that condone, encourage, or promote student sexual activity among unmarried students.”²⁰ Contraception cannot be given out on school property, and information on contraceptives can only be provided if “it is in a manner consistent with the preceding provisions of the part and clearly informs students that while such measures may reduce the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases or becoming pregnant, only abstinence removes all risk.”²¹ While this may seem fairly specific at first glance, the bill left a lot of questions to be answered.

SB3301 said that teachers must emphasize abstinence until marriage, and they cannot support what the bill referred to as “gateway sexual activity.” While it is still not clear exactly what these “gateway sexual activities” are, legislators said that it included activities like touching

¹⁸ SisterReach, “Our Voices and Experiences Matter: The Need for Comprehensive Sex Education Among Young People of Color in the South,” SisterReach, 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

the breasts, buttocks, or inner thigh.²² The policies that were enforced in the same bill even go so far as to punish teachers who do anything even perceived as condoning contraception or sexual experimentation; these teachers could face lawsuits or fines.²³ SisterReach, which is a Memphis-based reproductive justice organization, says that policies like these are damaging to all youth in Memphis but are especially harmful for black youth; 90% of chlamydia cases and 95% of gonorrhea cases are reported by black Memphians.²⁴ One would think that with such high rates of STIs and teen pregnancy, the city and state would want to educate teens on how to have safe-sex, since teens are having premarital sex regardless of the abstinence-only teachings; however, this does not seem to be the case.

One very important topic around which there is hardly any discussion is that of consent. While I did not specifically ask about consent, it never came up in my own personal interviews. Consent is also not a topic of Shelby County Schools' curriculum.²⁵ If teens are remaining abstinent until marriage, there is no need to discuss consent. We know, however, that most teens are not remaining abstinent, so it is very worrisome that these discussions are not being had. Founder and CEO of SisterReach Cherisse Scott said, "This is the Deep South where we talk

²² Tim Ghianni, "Tennessee governor signs controversial "gateway sexual activity" bill," Reuters, May 11, 2012, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-politics-tennessee-idUSBRE84B00D20120512>.

²³ Dani McClain, "Tennessee's Abstinence-Based Sex-Ed Law Is Especially Bad for Black Students," *The Nation*, June 29, 2015, accessed July 1, 2017. <https://www.thenation.com/article/tennessees-abstinence-based-sex-ed-law-especially-bad-black-students/>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Patrick Lantrip, "Sex Education in Shelby County Schools fails to teach basics of consent." *Memphis Mirror*. June 01, 2016, accessed July 1, 2017. <http://memphismirror.com/?p=1653>.

about ‘fornication,’ but we won’t talk about healthy relationships. Folks don’t want to talk about sex because this is the Bible Belt.”²⁶

There seems to be a lot of confusion about who is really responsible for teaching children about sex education. One article said, “If a student in a recently consolidated Shelby County schools is depending on adults at school to teach them how to stay health, they’re out of luck.”²⁷ Furthermore, many supporters of abstinence-based sex education say that parents should supplement the schools’ teachings with teachings of their own.²⁸ Both of these ideas show that people think parents should primarily be responsible for teaching their kids sex education. However, according to SisterReach’s 2015 report, only 30% of parents felt comfortable talking to their children about sex, while 70% did not even feel well enough informed about their own sexual and reproductive health.²⁹ These numbers are shocking. If parents do not feel comfortable or well enough informed to talk to their kids about sex, and they are not getting proper education at school, then where are they going to get their information from? Furthermore, 90% of the youth that SisterReach surveyed felt that were not fully educated about their sexuality and were not given the information they needed to be fully educated. This lack of information, according to SisterReach, leads to higher rates of unprotected sex and misconceptions about sex, especially contraceptive use. While 80% of teens surveyed said that they learned about STIs and abstinence, none of them reported receiving any information about “same-sex relationships,

²⁶ McClain, “Tennessee’s Abstinence-Based Sex-Ed Law is Especially Bad for Black Students.”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ SisterReach, “Our Voices and Experiences Matter: The Need for Comprehensive Sex Education Among Young People of Color in the South,” 16.

contraception negotiation practices, or sexual assault.” While most teens did note that they would or did use condoms and that they were known to be safe, they faced a lot of barriers to get them. Teens remarked that they would sometimes be interrogated by the staff at their local pharmacies when they tried to purchase condoms, and others incorrectly thought there was an age restriction on buying condoms. The most shocking report is that 80% of these teens surveyed said they would have unprotected sex if they were not able to access a condom.³⁰

For many of the Muslim families I interviewed, their children attended private schools, which were often times religiously affiliated and Christian. This prompted curiosity about sex education curriculum in private schools in Memphis. A 2013 Rhodes Institute looked at just this: sex education in three Memphis private schools—St. Mary’s Episcopal School, Christian Brothers High School (CBHS), and Westminster Academy.³¹ While none of the children of the Muslim parents I interviewed went to CBHS or Westminster, a few did go to St. Mary’s, which Claire Hautot cites in her paper. St. Mary’s Episcopal School is an all-girls school whose mission is “to provide a superior educational experience for girls which will encourage and enable each student to reach her individual potential.”³² Although it is a Christian school, it welcomes girls of all faiths, including young Muslim girls. The sex education curriculum at St. Mary’s, out of those I have encountered in my research, seems to be the most open and comprehensive of the schools in Memphis. At St. Mary’s, sex education is a multi-step process, which parents are made fully

³⁰ For the above paragraph, SisterReach, “Our Voices and Experiences Matter: The Need for Comprehensive Sex Education Among Young People of Color in the South,” 15-16.

³¹ Claire Hautot, *A Spectrum of Appropriateness: Sex Education in Religiously Affiliated High Schools*. Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies. July 2013, 10-14.

³² “She’s St. Mary’s,” St. Mary’s Episcopal School, accessed July 8, 2017. <https://www.stmarysschool.org/about-st-marys>.

aware of, and they are given the option to withdraw their daughter from any of the sessions, which the school nurse at the time said was rare.³³ During the fourth grade, the first session in the sex education curriculum is given; this focuses on their changing bodies, hygiene, and periods. Conversations about periods continue in the fifth grade. Once in the seventh grade, students are talked to about healthy and unhealthy relationships, along with information about respecting one's own body and image, which continues on into the eighth grade. When students are in the tenth grade, a "Worth the Wait" program is put on for about five or six sessions over multiple weeks; during these discussions, the school nurse talks about STIs, teen pregnancy rates in Memphis, and all contraceptives. The discussions are detailed and medically accurate. Students can also ask questions anonymously. They also discuss not just the physical consequences of sex but also the emotional. All of these programs are put on by the school nurse.³⁴

Many of the sons of Muslim parents I talked to went to MUS for part of their schooling. I asked two friends I have who went to high school at MUS if they had undergone any sort of sex education program there, and they had not. However, a lot of the boys also went to Presbyterian Day School (PDS) when they were younger. At the time they were attending, they went through a program called "Building Boys, Making Men."³⁵ According to the PDS website, Building Boys, Making Men is a PDS-created character education program "designed to give boys a godly

³³ Hautot, *A Spectrum of Appropriateness: Sex Education in Religiously Affiliated High Schools*, Bearman Interview.

³⁴ All information on sex education curriculum at St. Mary's was obtained from Claire Hautot's 2013 RIRS paper. Claire Hautot, *A Spectrum of Appropriateness: Sex Education in Religiously Affiliated High Schools*. Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, July 2013.

³⁵ Braxton Brady, "Building Boys, Making Men - Our Character Education Program," Only at PDS, accessed July 10, 2017. <http://www.pdsmemphis.org/only-at-pds/building-boys-making-men>.

vision and definition of manhood.” They define manhood in this program by teaching their boys that “a real man glorifies God by seeking an adventuresome life of purpose and passion as he protects and serves others.” Topics covered include peer pressure, drinking, myths of manhood, dating, sex, pornography, music, school, and money, among others.³⁶ This program takes place in the fifth and sixth grade. Although it is unclear exactly how much this program focuses on sex education and what exactly it teaches about it, it is evident that PDS feels the need to talk to boys from a *young age* about the values that they need to be to be successful, respectful men in the future.

While most parents affirmed that the primary responsibility for teaching children sex education is on the parents, they also affirmed that the schools, and even religious institutions they attend, have a responsibility to support and supplement this. As can be seen from the SisterReach report, at least among young people of color and their families—although I suspect these findings would be replicated in other communities as well—do not feel adequately prepared by their families concerning their sexuality and reproductive health. The SisterReach report concludes:

While parental involvement is crucial and all parents affirmed that they want to teach their children, all groups also acknowledged that parents can’t do everything, even if they do have all the information they need. Teens in the study seek confidential adults to talk to outside of their family circle, and not all parents are able to offer the kind of open and nonjudgmental education youth need. Teens also called for a sexual health clinic in all schools, particularly to meet the needs of students who are already sexually active or pregnant.³⁷

It is woefully apparent that the schools in Shelby County, at least in the public school system, are not doing enough to supplement their families and help their teens. Minister Jackson also spoke

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ SisterReach, “Our Voices and Experiences Matter: The Need for Comprehensive Sex Education Among Young People of Color in the South,” 20.

about how important it was for the church to teach comprehensive sex education. She said, “For a lot of kids, that’s where they come... [Church] gave me my foundation.” Jackson said that she does not think sex education should come from only one source. “I think... there’s a myriad of things we can learn from, and I think if we have everybody kind of engaged in this lifelong learning—this building up of our youth—it’ll tend to reinforce,” she said. Although abstinence is the only risk-free way to avoid any of the potential consequences of premarital sex, not educating our teens on how to have safe-sex and make informed decisions is not going to keep teens from having sex and is only going to exacerbate the high rates of STIs and pregnancy by which Memphis is already plagued.

Facing temptations

I also asked most of the parents I interviewed how they have prepared their children to face the temptations that adults and adolescents (especially those of college age) everywhere face, whether it’s drugs, alcohol, or sex. All of the parents had similar philosophies in which they outlined what their religion says and what their own expectations for their respective households were. Especially with the Khans and the Hammouds, both sets of parents said they clearly explained the consequences of certain actions, but ultimately, their children still had to be the ones to make those decisions. When I asked that question, Dr. Mariam Hammoud laughed and said that they have “long, long conversations” with their children. She said that listening to and supporting your children was the best thing you could do. “What we tell them, okay, that is your decision, you know, you are an adult. You know what’s right and what’s wrong. If you do this, that will be the consequence, so you choose,” Dr. Hammoud said. This sentiment was also echoed by the Khan parents. Dr. Ali Khan noted how the use of drugs and alcohol was something they did discuss, but more because “that’s not something that’s good, and it was not

only just from Islamic standpoint. It was only just... from reality standpoint that this is not something you do.” As parents, they also lead by example.

Although Seven Smith did not specifically mention how she prepared her own son to face temptations, she notes that she always encouraged her son to come talk to her about anything. She also told him that if he did not want to talk to her, she would find him someone else that he felt comfortable talking to. Smith did such a good job of ensuring that her son always talked to her, she notes, laughing, that there are some conversation they have together that she does not always want to have. She sometimes feels uncomfortable herself, but Smith promised she would always be there to talk with him if he wanted to, and she is happy he does. Smith thinks that the most important thing a child needs is for someone to listen to them. One of Smith’s dreams for her future is that she can create a safe place where kids can come and be themselves and be heard. Again, with discussions of temptations, just like with discussion of sex, religion provided the values that parents hoped their children would abide by.

The Difference Between Culture and Religion

One important distinction that came up in my interviews, especially those with Muslim parents, was the difference between religion and culture. Both the Khans and the Hammouds brought up this distinction. Dr. Ali Khan, when talking about Islamic values and some of their parenting styles, said that “some of these things are cultural also. They have nothing to do with Islam. It’s more because we came from Pakistan... the way we parent might be a way of Pakistani parenting rather than a truly Islamic way of parenting.” He notes that Muslims in Syria are going to be different from Muslims in Pakistan, or any other place around the world, and that many of the ways they do things might be more based on Pakistani culture rather than on Islam. One such example, according to Khan, is that Pakistani culture “is very paternalistic.... A father

figure is... not someone you expect to joke around with or play with and things like that.” Khan noted that he and his wife had made a very conscious decision as parents themselves to deviate from this cultural aspect, creating a more open and friendly relationship with their son.

The difference between culture and religion also arose when talking about sex education, or rather, the lack of talking about sex and sex education. The Khans did not really talk to their son about sex except to say that it was forbidden until marriage, which is an Islamic concept; however, the lack of speaking about it is more cultural. Dr. Mariam Hammoud said, “It’s more of a cultural thing.... Sheikh Yasir... [is] also very open in his lectures about that, so he will talk about it. He will talk about the periods, and what’s allowed in that, and then sexual relationship, marriage, and all that. So in his lectures, he’s pretty open about that.” The Khans, both physicians, spoke about medical school in Pakistan and the awkwardness of learning about and talking about reproduction and reproductive anatomy. In Dr. Ali’s anatomy or physiology class, which he said had about 140-150 students in it, with the majority being male students, a discussion about reproductive anatomy came up; the usually “rowdy classroom” became “pen-drop” silent. He remarked that “people were just almost embarrassed to be in that class.... People were just silent, looking down, just taking notes, and class ended and people just darted out.... So that’s more, again, more of a cultural thing that... these things are just not discussed.” Dr. Salma then went on to talk her Gynecology classes, which were comprised of both males and females. She said it was “awkward” to have males and females together in delivery and similar situations. Dr. Ali also said that there are male Obstetrician-Gynecologists (OB-GYN) who have “large, considerable practices,” but generally, “men don’t want to go into it.” In his own OB-GYN rotation, he said, “I think I went into the hospital like twice. I was like,... I’m not going there.... But again, it’s a cultural thing.” Since it seemed like topics such as puberty and sex were

not talked about, I asked Dr. Salma who she went to when she had questions about going through puberty or other things when she was a child. She said that of course she could ask her mom questions, “but it was not like she has to sit here and tell us ahead of time that this will be happening.... But we could ask her.... But there was always a distance, a shyness. We were just learning by experience.”

Dr. Ali Khan also mentioned the struggle for understanding the difference between tradition and religion when thinking about MIC and how it is different from a typical mosque. He says, “I think part of the thing is that there is a... misconception amongst Muslims about tradition. So some things are by tradition because they were done at that time. And some are by law. So Muslims a lot—not just here, all over the world—sometimes get confused about those things.” He goes on to cite the use of TVs in MIC as an example. “Nowhere in the world will you see televisions inside the mosque,” he says, except at MIC. With such a long prayer room, nobody in the back is able to see what is happening at the front, so MIC projects the speaker onto TVs that are displayed throughout the prayer room so that everyone can see. Dr. Ali noted that a “more traditional scholar may have had difficulty understanding that,” but one of the strengths of MIC is that Sheikh Qadhi has “brought the more modern aspects which don’t conflict... with the basic tenets of Islam.” Khan says other traditionalists also think that Muslims should not celebrate any holiday that the Prophet Muhammad did not celebrate, such as the Fourth of July. But, as Khan says, “there’s nothing wrong with celebrating Fourth of July. It’s not a religious occasion.... You’re not praying to some other God.... You wanna see fireworks, go ahead and see fireworks.” It is with examples like these that the struggle between tradition and the actual beliefs and laws of the religion comes into play.

Mrs. G and Dr. Sal did not talk about the difference between culture and religion so much as they talked about how the culture in Pakistan, where they grew up, was much more conducive to living a more religious life. In Pakistan, Islam was present in almost all aspects of civilization and life. Dr. Sal said, “In our country, back there we would have mosques in different areas and they would have five times a day.... The call for prayer.... And then [on the] TV, you would have some programs here and there.... All of those things that you unknowingly still absorb.” In Pakistan, where Islam was the majority religion, the way of life was infused with Islam and its practices. In the United States, however, where Islam is a minority religion, it is not the same. Dr. Sal said, “Here, you have to make a concerted effort to teach your kids about it because they are not exposed to all that.” Efforts to practice religion and teach one’s kids religion have to be a lot more intentional.

Although this discussion really only came up in my interviews with Muslim parents, I think there are a few reasons for this. Almost all of the Muslim parents I spoke with were first generation Pakistani immigrants who came to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, they have transnational identities that are influenced both by the “American” culture that they have moved to and their native Pakistani culture. However, it is important to note that there is an absence of a clear “culture” in America because it is a pluralistic society composed of many different types of cultures. Because of this lack of a clear culture in America, immigrants and their communities continue to think of their native, in this case Pakistani, culture as most dominant in their lives.

In my interview with Minister Essence Jackson, we did not talk so much about the difference between culture and religion as we did Southern culture. Growing up in Ohio, and only having lived in Memphis for two years, Jackson said that people were shocked when she

told them that she knew what STDs and STIs were going into middle school. In Ohio schools, sex education was offered to fifth graders, who spent a quarter of a semester learning comprehensive sex education. She joked that they showed the “old 1980s gruesome videos of different things.” Jackson was also given education about HIV and AIDS. Ohio did not have restrictions on sex education, and she was shocked when she came to Memphis and found out there were so many restrictions. She said, “It was mind boggling because... how do we not give our children a fighting chance in this world?... People think down here... if we talk about it, we’re promoting irresponsible sex, and that’s not what we’re doing. We’re telling... these kids how to be safe.” Jackson says that in the South, we have this idea of “respectability,” and she said that “Southern culture perpetuates this idea of if we don’t talk about it, it’ll go away.” She says there needs to be a definite change in how our society, and especially the South, talks about and views sex education.

Change Over Time

The idea of change over time also appeared in many of my interviews. Most of the comments and stories centered on the fact that the world is more progressive and talks a lot more about sex and sex education than it did in the past. Everybody referenced “20, 30 years ago” as a comparison point.³⁸ When talking about sex education, Dr. Mariam Hammoud said, “I think back maybe 20 years ago, it was more kind of taboo and restricted, and parents were not talk[ing] to kids about it, but now it’s changed. Even in Pakistan, I think everybody talks with their kids and things have changed a lot.” Back then, Dr. Mariam said that talking about sex or related topics was not something you could do in front of your parents. Twenty or thirty years ago in Pakistan, she said, your marriage would be arranged. “They will pick your partner, and

³⁸ Drs. Mariam and Asad Hammoud, Personal Interview, June 19, 2017.

they will let you know... you are getting married.”³⁹ She laughed at this, seeming to acknowledge that times are different and this is not nearly as common as it used to be. She goes on to mention how kids today are exposed to a lot more than they used to be. “Even in cartoons they will be teaching stuff that you will get surprised at what they are putting in the cartoons, so that’s why I think it’s important to talk to children.”⁴⁰ Dr. Ali Khan has seen a “remarkable difference in... television” than what he saw when he first moved to the United States. When asked about changes in Pakistan, he said, “They are going away from Islam it looks like. They are... trying to be more Westernized. They think sex and everything there is going on.” Dr. Sal also said, “I think over time it’s becoming more acceptable.” Although talking about sex is still a bit of a taboo in Pakistani culture, this is changing over time just as it has in the United States as well.⁴¹

Amanda Williams, who grew up in the 1970s, says that there were still a lot of references to sex in the music from that time, which she was aware of as a kid and as a teenager. But, she notes, she also did not have the internet, where you could look things up or are constantly blasted

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ It is interesting to note that there is one major historical event that sparked intense conversations on the importance of sex education: the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Questions concerning the appropriateness of conversations about homosexuality and sex for reasons other than reproduction were disregarded with the desperate need to talk about safe-sex practices. People were literally dying, and no one could argue that sex education wasn’t necessary now. The Surgeon General at the time, C. Everett Koop, said, in a 1986 *Times* cover story, “There is now no doubt that we need sex education in schools and that it must include information on heterosexual and homosexual relationships.... We have to be as explicit as necessary to get the message across. You can’t talk of the dangers of snake poisoning and not mention snakes.” By 1993, 47 states, compared to three in 1980, had mandated sex education for students in some form; all states supported AIDS education. See Lily Rothman, “How AIDS Changed the History of Sex Education,” *Time*, 12 Nov, 2014, <http://time.com/3578597/aids-sex-ed-history/>.

with sexual references in TV shows and commercials. Williams says, “I would say that talking about sex... [is] definitely in the forefront now.”

While Minister Jackson could not necessarily comment on changes she has seen in Southern culture, having only lived in Memphis for two years now, she said that change is still necessary. “Cultural shift and cultural change work is a slow and steady work. It’s nothing that happens over night... if it happens over night, then question it,” she said. SisterReach and people like her are working to change this culture that still views sex and sex education as taboo.

Conclusion

Through my interviews with Christian and Muslim parents, along with religious and community leaders, I was able to gain insight into how religion influences parenting and teaching sex education. For the Christians and Muslims of Heartsong Church and the Memphis Islamic Center, their faith and religion provided a set of moral values that they try their best to live by, and these morals are what they want to pass down to their children, above all else. One of the times that these moral values come into play is with the task of teaching their children sex education. Despite the negative stereotypes regarding the influence of religion on the teachings of sex education, the parents that I talked to were, for the most part, fairly realistic about our society and sex today. The fact of the matter is that in today’s society, most people do not wait until marriage to have sex, and although values like abstinence until marriage are still encouraged, parents still want their kids to have the necessary information regarding their sexuality.

When comparing and contrasting the Christian parents and the Muslim parents, both sets of parents set abstinence until marriage as the standard they *hoped* their children would live up to. To some parents, this was based on religious belief—the idea that premarital sex is a sin. To

others, this was more from a health and safety standpoint—sex before marriage can have bad consequences, both physically and emotionally. All of the Muslims parents stated that premarital sex was a sin and was not allowed, based on religious belief. Only one set of Muslim parents did not talk to their kids about puberty or sex, except to say that sex before marriage was not allowed; this being said, all of the parents allowed their children to attend their schools' respective sex education programs. The Christian parents that I talked to were a bit more forthcoming with the information they provided their children. For some parents, this involved a planned conversation about sex. For others, this meant providing answers to questions that their children asked. While some thought that premarital sex was a sin, others discouraged it but did not necessarily believe it to be a sin. Again, their children were all allowed to attend what programs their schools had on sex education.

While most people expressed the opinion that sex education is primarily the responsibility of the parent, they thought it should be supplemented by the school, and maybe even the church or mosque. Shelby County Schools leave much to be desired in terms of the comprehensiveness of their sex education programs. With the strict rules imposed by the “Gateway Sexual Activity” Bill, Memphis teens do not have a reliable way of getting accurate information about safe-sex practices and sexual health. This is especially true for teens of color, as the SisterReach report showed. Furthermore, many parents do not seem to feel comfortable or educated enough themselves to provide the best information for their children. This is why it is especially important that teens are getting the information they need at school. Family life is not always a constant, but school should be. It is also important to note that out of both my conversations with parents and my study of sex education programs in public schools in Memphis, ideas of consent and sexual abuse do not seem to be talked about very much. This was

one of the major flaws Minister Jackson noted about the sex education curriculum in Memphis schools. Not teaching our kids about consent, she said, really “leaves them at a disadvantage because then you don’t know if what someone did to me is... assault or... me consenting.” This is an integral part of sex education and should be reinforced by the parents, the school, and the religious institutions.

Alongside what I learned from these parents and community leaders about religion, sex education, and parenting, I learned a lot about the importance of talking to people of different faiths and learning about their beliefs and practices. Currently, religion seems to be more divisive than ever; stereotypes of entire groups of people are used as justification for discrimination. It is more important now than it ever has been to take time to learn about other faiths and their followers, just as Heartsong and MIC have done. By speaking with members of each community about something as universal as parenting, I was able to learn so much about each faith and the experiences of the people who practice them. Yes, there were differences between the two religions. That cannot, and should not, be denied. But there were also many similarities, and at least in the context of this paper, the similarities outnumbered the differences. Parents, regardless of whether they are Christian or Muslim, want their children to live honest, good, kind, faithful, and healthy lives.

Talking about sex and sex education in the Bible Belt of the South is, for a lot of people, a difficult and uncomfortable discussion to have. When I mentioned my topic, both to the people I interviewed and those simply interested in what I was doing this summer, I got a lot of looks and surprised comments. These reactions show that sex education, and the religious implications of it, is something we need to talk about even more; not talking about it is certainly not going to make it go away. However, as Heartsong Church and the Memphis Islamic Center have shown,

getting past the difficulties and discomforts that accompany misunderstandings is very much a possibility.

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